

Mount Washington

MAURO SENESI

THE OLD MAN had decided to buy a pipe. Slowly he walked toward Mrs. Winslow's store: he wanted to leave himself a chance or two and that's why he went so slowly, swaying on his legs like a pistolero when he's killed all of his enemies. He moved so that the sun would shine on his mountaineer's badge, and from there flash into the eyes of the vacationers. But they didn't care, not a bit: they were fat-bellied businessmen and young girls in love and robust boys who had learned mountain climbing at college. They preferred riding on the cog railway or, at the most, short walks in the level forest. If anyone did start off, knapsack over his shoulders and wrapped in ropes like a modern slave, to get a taste of the mountains, he first chose himself a young, strong guide who could pull him and his friends right up to the summit.

And so there was nothing left for the old man but to enter Mrs. Winslow's shop, the door of which, dark as a death, had finally appeared before him. He said good morning, trying to feel gay, for he was re-

alizing the dream of his entire lifetime: to buy a good pipe, one of those with an inlaid stem and ivory bowl, and he wanted it carved to look like the head of a mountain goat. He was ready to choose carefully, without caring how much it cost: for twenty years he had been setting his money aside on purpose. Then he'd put the pipe in his mouth and go to his son's, to live off him for the rest of his life: he had brought him into the world and fed and clothed him, after all, with just that in mind.

There weren't any mountain goat pipes and the old man protested loudly to Mrs. Winslow. Two tourists, a man and a woman who were buying little wooden statues, began to laugh. The old man was not offended; they didn't know what it meant to have a mountain goat in your mouth, at a certain age. He'd be seeing it in front of his nose and he'd have a feeling he was up nine thousand feet high; the vacationers didn't know that. She was one of those women who want never to grow old, with her hair dyed platinum and her wrinkles

filled with foundation cream, she opened her mouth wide when she smiled to show off her new teeth. And at the waist she was squeezed tight as a sausage, it must have been hard for her to breathe.

The old man began to talk about the mountain: "It makes you young again," he happened to say.

The tourist looked uneasily at the woman he was with; she didn't seem to be his mother. "You've got to have the calling for it," he said. He certainly didn't, you could tell by the fair skin on his face and the bright shine of his shoes. He was a young fellow with crafty eyes, the city type, who had come to the White Mountains only to follow his companion, long past her prime but jingling with gold.

"What calling?" retorted the old man. "I've been scaling mountains forty years, and never had any." He looked strangely at the powdered woman; hers were pathetic eyes, like a plucked falcon's. "There's no pipe with a mountain goat's head," he said. "You've got to find one for me, Mrs. Winslow, because I can't go into retirement without my pipe, I really can't."

The woman gazed longingly out the window, toward the distant, sunlit mountains. "Is there snow on the top?" she asked. "It depends," said the old man, "usually you can find some." She began to dream of herself as young again and throwing snowballs at Jean, on a white crest.

"I feel weak," said Jean, "you know that." He gave the woman a look full of tacit warning, but she had already decided. She loved Jean and wanted to be young for him, and yet could decide on her own. She asked the old man if he was willing to be their guide.

"It's on account of the mountain goat that I'm accepting," he said gaily. Then, in a professional tone of voice, he asked them what trail they would choose for the

ascent.

"Something light," said Jean, worried, "just to begin with." But the woman winked an eye at the old man, from behind Jean's back.

"We could go around to Glen Ellis Falls," said the old man, "and then up by Huntington Ravine."

THEY AGREED on early dawn for their departure, but the sun was already high and the tourists still hadn't left their hotel. The old man was afraid that Jean had managed to convince the woman, he felt a tight constriction in his chest, like jealousy. The façade of the hotel suddenly looked to him like that of a Greek temple, where rites of love and of youth were being performed: since he had grown old his imagination often carried him away like that. "Oh damn these gigolos anyway," he said aloud. At that moment the woman appeared in the glass door: she was wearing slacks and seemed much fatter. Jean followed her, handsome and bored, wrapped in scarves and sweaters.

The woman was in good spirits and grew even more so when they started to rise. The face creams she had just applied made her skin smooth and firm, the violent poppy of her lips was lovely to see from a distance too. She jumped ahead like a kangaroo, inviting Jean to keep up.

"Hey now, I'm the boss here: you've got to go slow," said the old man, weighted down with ropes and rancor. It was hard climbing for him, his bones grated one against another and the light wind blew into the cracked wrinkles of his face. He felt very old, and the rough trail he had chosen now filled him with dismay. Only Jean's step was agile, he might have been walking still in the great lobby of the hotel.

Then the birch and spruce woods ended and they found themselves on the bare

granite. The old man felt as if he was touching a loved one's flesh. It was warm, light rock, dotted with goldenrod. "Now I'll tie you together," he said with newfound energy.

They proceeded with the rope, the old man leading and Jean bringing up the rear. In the middle, the woman gave out short, ringing squeals of laughter which echoed back to her from the bottom of the clefts. She thought that Jean was admiring her sun-filled hair.

For a while the rope remained slack, between the old man and the woman, the woman and Jean. The old man heard it dragging on the rock and tried to climb faster: it took him the force of desperation, but the woman continued to skip brightly from one jutting stone to another, so that Jean would admire her. Jean's mind was far away, in rooms full of poker chips and girls with low-necked dresses; he kept in step without even seeing the mountain, thanks to his youthful energy. The old man, meanwhile, had wicked impulses: he would have liked to run to make the two of them lose their balance and then pull them behind him up to the summit.

FROM THE VALLEY arrived faint sounds, the sun flooded it with light, and tiny cars could be seen on the little white streets.

The rope grew taut as soon as the ravine became steeper, and the old man with a shiver felt its embrace on his lame muscles. Aiding himself with the pick he gave a hard tug. Jean lost his balance and fell, swearing. He stood up again with one of his trouser legs ripped and a skinned knee. "Poor Jean," said the woman, but she didn't approach him.

"We might as well turn back now," said

Jean, his heart swollen with anger.

"No," said the woman, "we'll get to the top." She was watching the movements of the old man become little by little more agile, young again, as if a mysterious flux were passing from the rock to his muscles.

There was no more soil on the mountain, the rock was clean and compact as opaque crystal. The old man felt more and more in form. He turned two or three times to look at the woman, Jean, and the valley with a small smile of happy pride. Then he began to climb again, pulling the rope; it was a tiring ascent but now he felt sure of winning. The woman went up aching from weariness: the cream was melting down her face and her lipstick, too, had faded; pitilessly the high air made her tired curls go straight. Jean wasn't looking at her. He was all worn out and he whimpered like a child.

They abandoned him before the summit in a little niche. By now a common fever had them in its grip and bound them faster than the rope. The man found grooves with his pick and then, swinging, mounted higher, pulling the disheveled woman after him. They were young again, the two of them; Jean saw them disappear above his head and felt almost like crying, as if he really were an abandoned child.

The midday sun had driven all the shadows from the mountain, had left it white and pure as a wedding cake. When the man and woman arrived at the top the lines on their faces had smoothed out. Huge black birds were flying beneath them so that they could hear the soft flapping of their wings. Suddenly the woman laughed, sincerely: she wasn't thinking of Jean. The man felt like laughing, too; he didn't feel old any longer and he had forgotten about the pipe with the mountain goat.